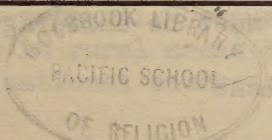


To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

ber 129



January, 1948

## A Christian Approach to Modern Rural Life

by David E. Lindstrom\*

Millions of people in the world are hungry. Hungry people can be willing subjects for war propaganda and hysteria. The people in our country live in an era of abundance and well-being hardly ever experienced in our history. We are called and looked to as a Christian nation; as Christians we must have concern for our fellowmen, for the hungry millions in other lands.

It is significant that in a world of strife and hunger we should live in a country in which every man is free to think and act for himself; we are truly a democratic nation. We are a people in which individual initiative and private enterprise have become highly developed. We are a nation with large numbers of small and large business enterprises. There are three and one-half million business enterprises outside of agriculture and about six million such enterprises in agriculture — a total of ten million places where experiments may be tried, where no further authority is needed to authorize an experiment. Ten million separate private business budgets. Ten million units for 143 million people is about 14 people per unit. Agriculture, with six million units, has 27 million people, or between four and five per enterprise, which makes of it a family unit enterprise. It will be surprising to many, however, to learn that non-agricultural enterprises in our country average so small a number per enterprise. By this we mean we are still a country of predominantly small enterprises, many of which are in the rural communities of our nation.

People living in small communities, operating their own businesses, and working together for the common social interest, such as for schools, churches, libraries, and the provision of social welfare, are the greatest asset democracy can have. They are a sturdy bulwark against anti-democratic forms of society. It is only when we allow a few to own, operate, or direct enterprises, or control our forms of social organization, that we place ourselves in danger of suppression and domination, whether it be by public bosses, as it was under Hitler in Germany, or whether it is under control of wealth in the hands of a few self-seeking individuals.

If we believe in a Christian democracy in which there is widespread ownership of property and an opportunity for the masses of people to have a voice in the making of policies, be they public or private, then we must look to a preservation and nurturing of those ideals and objectives which will insure a Christian

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democracy in our land. What are the ideals and objectives necessary for such assurance? We can list a few of them for rural life, realizing that rural life is all-important to a democratic society like ours. Some of the objectives may be stated as follows:

Soil resources must be conserved

Family-sized owner-operated farms must be encouraged

The farm must be modern and efficient

Tenancy should be a stepping stone to farm ownership

The farm family must be nurtured

Neighborliness must be kept vital

Rural people should run their own organizations

The quality of human stock in rural areas should be improved

Schools should be organized and conducted as rural schools

Rural churches should be revitalized

Rural health should be adequately protected and cared for

Rural people should have social security

Rural people should work and play together

The rural community should be effective

Let us analyze some of these objectives in terms of our national and world needs. We live in a world community today. What we do affects people in other lands and what they do can affect us. The world cannot go on half hungry and half fed. To make a Christian approach will reveal one way out.

Soil resources must be conserved. We are told that we have only ten years in which to change the trend from exploitation to conservation. Otherwise we will continue on toward becoming another of the world's impoverished nations. It is no longer a matter of concern to the individual farmer -- it concerns all of us; it is a concern of society. It is not alone an economic problem; it has social and moral aspects. In the last analysis, it will take a Christian farmer and a Christian landlord working together to change the trend by democratic procedures; otherwise we may have to look to some form of compulsion to get the job done.

Soil conservation is related to family-sized, owner-operated farms. We know the farmer-owner-operators are the best conservers of soil while tenancy, especially when the tenant moves often, takes the most out from our soils. But family-sized farms owned by the operators mean a preservation of democracy as well, especially if the farms are operated with a sense of Christian stewardship by farmers who have concern for the soil and for their fellowmen.

The trend in the United States has been away from the family-sized farm. Farms increasing most in numbers from 1940 to 1945 were those over 1,000 acres and those under 50 acres in size. Those 50 to 400 acres in size actually decreased in numbers. Yet a community with a large percentage of owner-operated small businesses and family farms has been shown by recent studies to have more people, more real prosperity, better schools, more and better local organizations, more and better churches, better and more modern homes and less crime and delinquency than one with a large percentage of absentee ownership of the farms and business enterprises of the community.

Yet our small unit system of farm operation is under fire. A determined effort, for example, is being made to do away with the 160-acre limitation of water for irrigated lands in the West. Rather we need legislation to encourage owner-operated family-sized farms.

The farm business in America must be modern and efficient. We are facing a world in which there is much slave or near-slave labor, people with standards of living far below our own. We have an obligation to help increase the efficiency of labor in other lands; but meanwhile we must become increasingly efficient if we are to compete with their low standards and maintain our own. In the long run, the advance of living standards in other lands will be reflected in an advance of living standards in our own land. We cannot permanently have high living standards here while the rest of the world is living on low standards.

Tenancy should be a stepping stone to ownership. Youth cannot gain a foothold on our best lands today without some form of backlog such as inheritance or outside financial support. Our best lands, also, are occupied by many who feel it more profitable to rent than to own land. Yet studies have shown that a young man starting on good land has a better chance of coming out on top than he has on poor land. We need Christian farmers on the land. The church can take a part in helping Christian young people get a foothold on good farm land.

The farm family must be nurtured. Farming is a family business. The most successful farmers are those whose families cooperate in making farm life both profitable and enjoyable. Farming should be a way of life -- a Christian way of life, for farm people live close to the imponderable processes of Nature. Nature responds to those who try to understand her ways. The successful farm family is the farm family that cooperates in making the farm business successful and in making farming truly a way of life. We must nurture the farm family on the land because it is the population source from which comes the growth in our urban population. We must remember that farmers produce not only the surplus food and fibre needed for our nurture and warmth but also children who come to make up the deficit that would occur were there not a movement of from one-half to two-thirds of the children from rural areas as they become young men and women. The contribution of youth to urban areas is six times as valuable economically as the contribution of foodstuffs and fibre. We must nurture and protect the farm family on the land.

Neighborliness should be kept vital. The most numerous of our cooperatives in America even today are the mutual-aid, trade-work type of cooperatives. Nothing will ever take the place of the kind of neighborliness that brings people to help each other in times of stress, to help out a neighbor when he breaks his leg for example or becomes ill. Though school reorganization and church consolidation may strike at the heart of a neighborhood, we must do all we can to preserve the active open-country church and the adequate open-country school. These are institutions that can nurture neighborliness. A good neighborhood working

together can best conserve the resources of the soil. A good neighborhood is essential to the development of a fine type of life on the farm. The neighborhood is the most important primary group beyond the family. It should be nurtured. It should be Christian.

Rural people should run their own organizations. It may be held by some that for greater efficiency organizations should be run by those who are paid to operate them. When we give over the running of our organizations to some paid executive, we lay ourselves open for the form of bureaucracy that can easily lead to totalitarianism. The most effective leaders in an organization are the voluntary leaders who are consecrated to the cause for which the organization was formed. The most effective local organization is the one in which members participate not only for what they get but also for what contribution they can make to the organization. Often the contributions made by members to an organization are the very things that help develop their personalities, their abilities to work with other people. Rural people should run their own organizations and should build them up in such a manner that they can participate in the making of policies that guide our nation. If national, state and local policies are thoroughly tested by discussion in neighborhood and community groups, then democracy is forever safe.

The quality of human stock in rural areas should be improved. The people on the farms are the custodians of our natural resources from which, in the future, we are to get the raw materials for our basic needs. They should be people who have the highest Christian ideals, who believe in the finest type of family life, and who contribute children to the cities who will take their part in building a stronger Christian democracy in those cities. It is most important, therefore, that we give attention to the quality of human stock in rural areas, for if the quality of the human stock is right the quality of the soil and live-stock will improve as well. We must have on the land a people possessed of a mature sense of Christian stewardship.

Schools in rural areas should be organized as rural schools. We are now beginning to realize that we have not had rural schools -- only schools in the country. Many of our schools in the country have been taught by people who have been trained in the city and for the city and who tended to educate our youth away from farm life. That trend is changing. Education now is, or should be, in terms of the environment. Youth educated in our schools must learn how to live in a community for many of them will live in a rural community. They should learn in school how to participate in making the community a better place in which to live. The type of training for teachers must be changed so that they will understand rural life and rural people and be able to teach rural children the values and ideals that emanate from and inhere in good rural community life.

Rural churches should be revitalized. We note with dismay that whereas urban areas have slightly over half the people claiming membership in churches, in rural areas only about a third claim church membership. When we count those attending regularly, we find that fewer than half of our adults attend church regularly and that even a smaller percent of our children are in church school. Our policy has been to take the best leaders, try them out in the country, then place them in the city. Our new policy should be to assign leaders to rural areas who are trained to serve rural people and allow them to remain there long enough to mature and develop an effective program. Such leaders should have security of tenure, adequate financial support and be given a status of dignity and importance





in the religious profession. Rural churches are the seedbed for the development of membership and leadership of all churches in our society. They need to be revitalized.

Rural health should be adequately protected and cared for. During World War II, selective service boards rejected more men from rural than from urban areas. This is partly because the quality of the stock has probably become lower, but primarily because we do not have the health protection and medical facilities in rural areas that we do in the city. Health protection is therefore of a national concern.

Rural people should have social security. All other classes, except farmers and domestic servants, are protected from disaster and want in old age. A plan for extending similar protection to farm laborers, farm tenants, farm owners and domestic servants should be worked out. But more fundamentally, security of the family on the land is of prime importance to national security; it can mean stability of rural institutions -- schools, churches, welfare -- and rural life.

The independence of rural people should be protected. They are the unpredictable element in national elections. They are not swayed by mass propaganda as are so many city groups. They think for themselves and form their own opinions. This free independence of thought and action is essential to the ongoing of our democratic institutions.

Rural people should work and play together. The farm family works as a unit in making farming successful. Town and country people in rural communities are finding they can have better schools, churches, and other community facilities by working together. So also with use of leisure time. Lack of wholesome recreational opportunities leads to increase in crime and delinquency, so much so that crime rates are highest for those coming from rural communities. They can enjoy their folk games, sports festivals, music and drama tournaments and youth camps. They can learn to work together better through social recreation. Constructive use of leisure time pays dividends in the town and country community. It results in higher forms of rural culture.

The rural community is the citadel of civilization. It is important therefore that there remain in the countryside a generation of men and women who claim rural life at its best as their heritage, a people capable of making the highest possible contribution both to their communities and to the nation as a whole. They need to look at themselves critically. Then, recognizing their shortcomings, they should build up the economic, religious, educational, health and recreational life of the community to a place where rural people have the same cultural advantages as those who reside elsewhere. We must help our rural communities to become active and to function as vital social and economic groups. They should be Christian and continuously feed to society a Christian citizenship.

